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Luís Miguel Carvalho^a & Estela Costa^a

^a Institute of Education, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

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Seeing education with one's own eyes and through PISA lenses: considerations of the reception of PISA in European countries

Luís Miguel Carvalho* and Estela Costa

Institute of Education, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

The paper addresses the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) as a public policy instrument, whose worldwide circulation is mediated by processes of reinterpretation, negotiation, and re-contextualization, where national, local, and international agencies intertwine. It is focused on the active reception of PISA in six European spaces (Francophone Belgium, France, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, and Scotland) along its first three cycles. The paper identifies two contrasting developments: the Program's divergent uses and its attractiveness in different social worlds. The paper gives particular attention to what is called the 'update of reference societies' in the context of national receptions of PISA. These 'updates' are analyzed as part of a composite process that involves domestic reasons, either related to current agendas for education or to deep historical factors, and injunctions related to PISA's rationale and PISA objects.

Keywords: PISA; OECD; Europe; policy tool; mutual surveillance; reference societies

Introduction

Since the beginning of the century, the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA), an international comparative assessment of 15-year-old students' competencies, best known by its acronym – PISA – has become a major tool for the intervention of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the transnational and national policy processes of the education sector (see, e.g., Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 2001; Martens, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2006; Rubenson, 2008).

This paper focuses on the active reception of this policy tool in six European spaces, along its first three cycles, 2000, 2003, and 2006. It brings to the fore two seemingly contrasting trends: the divergent uses of PISA in specific contexts, and yet the attractiveness achieved by this 'mutual surveillance' tool in different social worlds. The analysis gives particular attention to what is called the 'update of reference societies' in the context of national receptions of PISA, and is seen as part of a composite process that involves domestic reasons, either related to current agendas for education, or to deep historical factors, and injunctions related to the PISA rationale and PISA objects (main reports, extensive reports, technical reports, databases, and assessment tasks).

The analysis developed draws on the results of six studies on PISA circulation and use – in Francophone Belgium (Cattonar, Mangez, Delvaux, Mangez, & Maroy, 2009), France (Mons & Pons, 2009), Hungary (Bajomi, Berényi, Neumann, & Vida, 2009),

*Corresponding author. Email: lmcarvalho@ie.ul.pt

Portugal (Afonso & Costa, 2009), Romania (Rostás, Kósa, Bodó, Kiss, & Fejes, 2009), and Scotland (Grek, Lawn, & Ozga, 2009) – and also on an integrative reading of these (Carvalho, Costa, & Afonso, 2009). The studies were conducted under the scope of a large-scale research project on the role of knowledge in the governing of education and health systems, and their sources include a wide range of documents (OECD and national official documents, parliamentary debates, and media), as well as interviews with relevant actors (OECD officials, national policy-makers, researchers, and administrators)¹.

The paper starts with a brief presentation of the analytical perspective adopted here, namely regarding the inscription of PISA in the dynamics of the transnational circulation of knowledge and policies. In the second section, the paper focuses on some conspicuous differences regarding the way *the Program* is mobilized in the six European spaces mentioned above, and how those differences are related to cultural and political features of the reception contexts. In the third section, the paper describes the ‘reference societies’ – that is, societies taken as references for the reform of educational systems (see Schriewer, 2000; Sellar & Lingard, 2013) – that have been taken into account in national education debates about PISA in those six European spaces. Finally, in the last section, the paper stresses the cognitive and normative injunctions introduced by PISA in the reconfiguration of national/regional imaginaries, as well as in judgments about the positioning of those nations/regions in a world space.

PISA and the multidirectional flow of knowledge and policy

PISA is one of the various means of OECD’s intervention in education. Yet, one has to recognize its importance and singularity: with PISA the OECD is no longer dependent on statistical data created by national systems since it ‘generates its own data’ (Henry et al., 2001). Even more, thanks to PISA, the OECD does not only create data of its own, it also claims itself to be the provider of an expert-based independent framework for the monitoring and steering of school systems (Carvalho, 2012). Thus, throughout this paper, we tackle PISA as a ‘public policy instrument’ (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007) that combines comparative assessment techniques with a set of representations of education and a singular perspective about the (transnational and national) construction of educational policies and practices, in order to lead and shape social action in a given policy domain (see Carvalho, 2012; Pons & van Zanten, 2007). This way, we also assume the existence of an umbilical link between international comparative instruments for the assessment of students’ performances and contemporary policy-making. Indeed, mutual surveillance tools like PISA are resources for social actors, as they drive the way of constructing problems and policies (see Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003). Their weight in national policies cannot be ignored, as recently recalled by Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2012):

[I]n present times, policy-makers tend more to refer to international standards, rather than to a specific educational system when they advocate policy transfers. (p. 9)

We may thus understand the creation and exchange of these types of ‘knowledge for policy’ tools related to the ‘construction of multilateral spaces’ (Rutkowski, 2007), by international organizations, as a form they adopt to broaden their ‘scope of action’, by influencing national debates, aims, goals, and structures for/of education systems (Leuze, Martens, & Rusconi, 2007, pp. 9–10). Similarly, we work with the idea that public policies are processes made up of a complex set of actions and interactions carried out by multiple actors, in multiple spaces (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Therefore, to understand

‘traveling’ policy instruments (Ozga & Jones, 2006) developed in international organizations, we must identify the mediation processes of reinterpretation, negotiation, and contextualization that accompany their reception. Following Tom Popkewitz (2003), we also recognize that many categories circulating on a worldwide scale – and that carry the weight of authority of universal categories – have a local or regional origin.

Therefore, we look at the circulation of PISA as a part of multidirectional processes that involve reinterpretation, de-contextualization, and re-contextualization, and where national, local, regional, and international agencies intertwine. Thus, we adhere to Schriewer’s (2000, p. 327) advice regarding the need to analytically address a ‘weaving of opposites’, like ‘internationalization and indigenization’ or ‘supranational integration and intra-national diversification’. That is why, in this text, we keep with an interpretative tension between a vision which marks the emergence of ways of thinking and acting, in the field of education, that tend to unify our repertoire of opportunities and that may be associated with the emergence of a ‘new educational planetspeak’ (Nóvoa, 2002), and a polycentric vision of power, which enhances translations that accompany processes of policies and knowledge relocation, by cultural and historical circumstances (Popkewitz, 2003; Nóvoa, Carvalho, & Yanez, 2013).

Diverse mobilizations of PISA: contexts do matter

Studies on the impact of PISA in national policies acknowledge the variability of form, content, amplitude, and intensity of such effect (see, e.g., Bieber & Martens, 2011; Dobbins & Martens, 2012; Ertl, 2006; Greger, 2012; Grek, 2009; Gür, Çelik, & Özoğlu, 2012; Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009; Rinne, Kallo, & Hokka, 2004; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Steiner-Khamsi, 2003; Takayama, 2008).

The six studies under analysis also reveal very contrasting receptions and uses of this regulatory instrument in the six European contexts. For instance, while in France the PISA results were translated into alternative versions of what should be considered legitimate knowledge about the functioning of French education (Mons & Pons, 2009), in Hungary the PISA vocabulary and data became a kind of a master narrative for domestic educational policies (Bajomi et al., 2009). While in Francophone Belgium *the Program* operates, and is operated, in such ways that the regulating state becomes a deregulated state (Cattonar et al., 2009), in Portugal it functions as a substitutive national evaluation tool and a provider of information that legitimates governmental policies (Afonso & Costa, 2009).

Furthermore, the six studies also show that PISA objects and texts are mobilized to fulfill several purposes: to legitimize policy initiatives; to manage the policy agenda; to develop secondary research; and even to support the making or the improving of domestic regulatory instruments. Representations and rules that PISA bears are filtered, modified, and sometimes even contested. For instance, policies invoking PISA knowledge vary from country to country, and within each country (over time), regarding the proposed solutions and the goals to be achieved, as well as the targets for each measure (students, teachers, and families) or even the declared values (Carvalho, 2012).

Moreover, one might refer to the existence of a reduction/selectivity process because the tool is judiciously mobilized by national actors: data are more frequently used than the analysis and arguments provided by *the Program*; they tend to use it to legitimate agendas, strengthen priority purposes, reforms, and ‘isolated’ decisions, rather than to create ‘new policies’. Facing these elements, one may say that in the political sense there

is a selective mobilization of certain ‘pieces’ of PISA knowledge, which enables recurrent public policy issues to go back to the public agenda or to gain more visibility. So, PISA knowledge is used by decision-makers to legitimate policy problems and agendas and not necessarily to find solutions.

The results from the six studies allow us to associate these differences with the specificities of the contexts that actively receive PISA. Not only do the political factors that are usually taken into account – like the agency of brokers and entrepreneurs or the agenda of ongoing reforms (PISA is seemingly more invoked when issues of accountability, school system monitoring, or changing conceptions of curriculum are at stake) – but also where policy and knowledge factors combine, such as the existence of national knowledge traditions and structures within the field of assessment; their philosophical, theoretical, or methodological proximity-distance regarding PISA international comparative assessment framework; or even the strength of national involvements in previous international studies and/or in OECD initiatives. The research examined here shows that in countries with tradition in the field of international assessment and with close ties with OECD projects – Belgium, France, and Hungary, for example – there was a more evident public and political debate about PISA, and that the tool was much more deeply scrutinized or mobilized by each national scientific community. There is variability both in the public reception – positive or negative – and in the degree of conceptual proximity (or of assessment tradition) of the national actors toward the assessment framework.

Thus, in parallel with the studies mentioned above that identified and described different responses to PISA results, and their numerous and varied effects on national policies, we highlight the diffusion and circulation of PISA knowledge to be associated with a possibility of undetermined outcomes, historically and contextually contingent. Thereby, when ‘evidences’ and analyses generated within PISA circulate through specific political and cultural contexts, they are subject to re-contextualization – either absorbed or adapted or silenced – but they can also help to create new meanings and rules for local action. As recently demonstrated by Sellar and Lingard (2013, p. 479), with their analysis of the reactions to Shanghai’s performance on the 2009 PISA in three countries – England, the USA, and Australia – the tool is used to ‘push internal reform agendas’ within these nations, as well as to foster a ‘post-ideological framing of education policy’, structured around the so-called (positive) evidence regarding what-works.

In short, it can be said that there is no automatic or inevitable convergence of policies as an effect of PISA. In sum, specific political and cultural factors impact the way PISA objects and texts are reinterpreted, and made acceptable and efficient for the specific socio-cognitive contexts where they circulate, that is, within different nations and schooling systems.

The ‘update’ of reference societies

The specificities of the reception contexts are also important for understanding the diversity of ‘reference societies’ invoked in domestic debates about educational systems in each PISA cycle. By trying to follow a particular form of ‘externalization’ (Schriewer, 2000) – the externalization by reference to the world situation – we observed the direction followed by the eyes of national actors about the ‘Others’, when they produce comparisons or when invoking these societies as examples (positive or negative). Such is the case, for instance, when we identify the presence of the ‘Other’ that is meaningful for reasons of political and cultural history, and the ‘Other’ with whom there are strong

links of transference, dispute, and competition; good examples are the references to Germany in France, or the references to England in Scotland, or also to Germany in Hungary, or Flemish community in Francophone community (Belgium). These references to the 'neighbor' can be very different and bring about various informational and/or legitimacy supplements.

Yet, one might have to seriously consider the existence of more direct PISA effects regarding the societies taken as reference points for the reflection on education systems. This direct effect has multiple expressions. There is the presence of the 'Other' that ranks the top of the league tables – Finland embodied this type, repeatedly seen as a case for lesson drawing and becoming a pilgrimage spot for educational tourism. Shanghai, China took over this mantle in the 2009 cycle of PISA. There is also the 'Other' that is taken into account because they made progress, as with Poland, which has been looked upon as an example of a 'good student' for having improved results. And there is still a third type of 'Other', which includes countries that have been mentioned because of the effects that the so-called *PISA shock* produces in their educational self-reflections. This happened in France, where Germany, but also Japan and Austria, were considered role models of seriousness in the way they handled results; and it also occurred in Hungary where the Polish reform experience was interpreted as a proper way to act and respond, following the latter's bad initial results in PISA.

But there is still an invocation of other societies taken as examples; we call them the 'new buddies'. Some of these are examined because they are seen as sharing the same educational problems. For instance, in Francophone Belgium, where debates were dominated by the 'problem of equity', other European countries were also examined – France, Portugal, and Austria – because of their similar results regarding variation among schools and failure rates. Other 'new buddies' are chosen just because they have a radically different performance. For instance, in Hungary, the contrasting results achieved by the Swedish system regarding the variation of the results between schools was useful to legitimate the introduction of new policy measures intended to restrict school choice, and to foster the heterogeneity of the schools' social composition. The Hungarian case also reveals the extent to which the choice of the 'Other' may happen in the scope of the perception of the sharing of meaningful social and educational difficulties. It is materialized by means of the creation of equivalences between the integration of immigrants, in Germany, and the social issue of the Romanian ethnic minority, in Hungary. Therefore, we can say that invoking the 'Other' is a discursive exercise that only means to show the best and, through them, to animate the belief, and hope in 'progress'. However, it also serves to find 'equivalents' and 'differences' and thus to trace old/new identities and to strengthen the legitimacy of choices and measures to be taken.

The injunctions of a knowledge-policy instrument

Taking into account the previous descriptive elements, one might say the update of 'reference societies' is impacted by PISA injunctions. Our point is that PISA's frames, questions, indicators, and analyses define where, what, and why policy players should look for to give supplementary sense and legitimacy to their actions.

First of all, PISA induces where to look. PISA persuades the selection of 'reference societies', through criteria intrinsic to international comparative assessments, pointing to the best performers and major improvers, or better policy learners. Furthermore, *the Program* facilitates the selection of multiple other reference points, because it fixes the

relative positioning of each country in an imagined international competitive space that is reevaluated each three years.

But when PISA locates reflection about education in such competitive space-time, it simultaneously develops specific politics of cognition. In fact, the competitive space is not only a space of countries. Rather, it includes countries or education systems, but it is a space where these are displayed accordingly with specific categories of perception and judgment. Such is the case, for instance, through the opposed categories enacted recurrently in the analysis developed in PISA, like performance *versus* costs, school knowledge world *versus* real knowledge world, performance/quality *versus* equity, or challenge *versus* supportive system cultures. Moreover, the relations between these categories are discursively connected to other issues recurrently present in the OECD policy agenda over the last two decades: school autonomy, accountability, privatization, involvement of multiple stakeholders in the management and financing of schools, school choice, and school improvement. So, it is not just a matter of where to look, but of what to see elsewhere.

Finally, to see education with one's own eyes and through PISA's lenses means legitimating several OECD *dicta* about governing processes. We emphasize three: the primacy of the rational and 'based-upon-data' model, opposed to ideological and/or opinion-based coordination; the 'free acquiescence' of decision-makers to be involved and support expert-based mutual surveillance as an effective practice; and the perception of systematic assessment of literacy – generated by an organization that performs as an independent expert knowledge provider – as a useful and trustworthy resource for the steering of educational systems.

In the six examined studies, we have found these *dicta* naturalized in the credibility assigned to PISA and OECD by national policy-makers and other social actors who declare PISA to be useful to raise awareness, to help identify problems and provide good examples of reform, and to portray educational systems' weaknesses and strengths (Carvalho et al., 2009). Yet, we may find the same scripts enacted not at a national level, but at a supranational level as well; a good illustration of this is the reaction to the PISA 2009 report by the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism, and Youth (European Commission, 2010). The reaction has it all: it has the praise of mutual surveillance ('PISA identifies the most recent trends in education by assessing our performance compared with that of the most successful countries worldwide'); it has the identification of common problems in Europe ('the gap between the best performing education systems, and between the best performing schools and pupils within countries, remains too big'); it has the tribute to the European 'best performers' (Finland as usual), but also the assurance that improvement is possible ('member states like Poland, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Romania, and Bulgaria where cited as having substantially improved their scores in certain areas'); and finally, it has the narrative of progress through competition ('Europe must continue to improve if it is to maintain its status as a knowledge society').

Hence, if PISA provides a means and opportunity to education systems for selecting 'reference societies', it also participates in the reconfiguration of the national and regional imaginaries and the judgment about their places in the space-world according to the international standards that PISA carries and fixes.

Closing

We thus argue that there is neither a direct transfer nor an automatic import, nor a convergence of policies as a result of the circulation and reception of PISA. Our point is

that PISA fabrications open and close routes and establish a set of possibilities for public action for old and new policies. When mobilized in different sociocultural spaces, these fabrications are reworked by – and help to rewrite – systems of meaning and power relations, thus producing particular effects (Popkewitz, 2003). However, PISA becomes an unavoidable (and ‘obvious’) provider of information ‘based on proof’, a tool that creates and allows the creation of new problems and imagined new tomorrows.

To conclude, it is important to note that PISA is a ‘norm and standard’ instrument that does not operate only through the power of guilt. Of course, positions in a competitive space and numbers bring ‘naming, blaming, and shaming’ to national policy arenas. But the strength of PISA rests also in the hope it creates. PISA provides optimism about the possibility of reform and creates confidence in national policy actors – the encouragement of having in their hands the so crucial banner of ‘need to change’. Moreover, PISA brings the comfort of legitimizing policy problems and solutions with the blessing of putative universal, independent, expert knowledge. And it is perhaps this combination of universalism and scientism that makes PISA an ‘obligatory passage point’ (Callon, 1986) for many debates about education today.

Note

1. For a different analysis of these six studies, focusing the knowledge actors mobilize when they talk about PISA, in the public debate, see Pons (2012).

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